Report on the Municipal Leadership in Education Cross-Site Meeting

February 14-15, 2002

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Municipal Leadership in Education Cross-Site Meeting
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Meeting Summary

"I believe that it is in the mid-cities where we will see the next big trends towards municipal leadership in education" --Elizabeth Hale, Executive Director, Institute for Educational Leadership.

"In a school district everyone should be a leader"--Dr. Floretta McKenzie, President, The McKenzie Group, former Superintendent of District of Columbia Public Schools

February 14-15, 2002 marked the dates of the first annual cross-site meeting of the National League of Cities' Municipal Leadership in Education initiative. Municipal teams from the six project cities-- Ft. Lauderdale, FL; Charleston, SC; New Haven, CT; Lansing, MI; Columbus, OH; and Portland, OR spent two days engaged in lively discussion of the opportunities and challenges presented to them in their city's K-12 education landscape. The forum provided a unique opportunity for city officials and members of local city teams, to network and share school improvement strategies, and to hear from national experts.

Throughout the two-day meeting, team members exchanged ideas amongst themselves and with national experts on a variety of topics related to the municipal role in improving K-12 education in their communities. During the meeting, city teams presented case studies that examined specific challenges they face including the achievement gap, middle school reform, school bond campaigns, public engagement, school governance, and accountability issues. From these engaging dialogues and case studies, two facts were apparent: all six cities had incredible strengths and advice to share, and despite challenges and setbacks, cities have made valuable progress in just the first six months of the municipal leadership in education initiative. It was also clear that the cities share common challenges and concerns, particularly with respect to the achievement gap.

In addition to hearing from their peers, city teams heard from a variety of national experts on issues including: Leadership in School Improvement, Mobilizing Communities for Change, Using Data to Promote School Improvement, and Closing the Achievement Gap. Although the above topics were presented as separate panels, it is important to note that common themes and questions were apparent across the two-day discussion. This summary highlights several common themes that emerged from the comments of experts and city team participants during the two-day meeting.

The following information has been culled from the discussions between teams and national experts. NLC suggests that this information be used by cities to supplement previous reports, data, and discussions, in order to create a team action plan.

1. **Leadership in School Improvement:** Several speakers highlighted emerging needs and trends in the area of leadership in school improvement.

   - The trends in cities are waning school board influence, greater mayoral involvement, greater business involvement, and influential teachers unions. Colleges and universities also need to become more involved, particularly with respect to teacher preparation.

   - Elizabeth Hale, President of the Institute for Educational Leadership, reminded cities that their effort is largely about "leadership by persuasion" since most cities have no statutory authority over K-12 education.

   - Knowledge and collaboration are key to leadership by persuasion.

- Leaders must be armed with good information, particularly in the area of education reform. Possessing good education information often requires access to reliable education and social indicator data.

- Hale encouraged municipal leaders to engage in a five-step spiral process, in order to take the lead in education in their community:
    1. Find Out the issues and needs.
    2. Reach Out to people on their own turf.
    3. Spell Out goals, terms and actors.
    4. Work Out kinks and challenges.
    5. Build Out and share results.

- In a school district, everyone should be both a leader and a follower. Municipal leaders, parents, and students need to understand how they can contribute to improving education.

- Leaders must nurture leadership in others, both in individuals and in organizations.

- According to Dr. Floretta McKenzie, President and CEO of the McKenzie Group, municipal leaders can set an example by always doing what is best for children even if it hurts their budgets. "When we put aside our personal interests for the good of children then we can move forward."

Resources: Cross-Boundary Leadership, Neil Pierce; Taking Leadership in Your Own Backyard and Education and Community Building, Institute for Educational Leadership; Together We Can, Marty Blank; The Path of Most Resistance, Eight Lessons Learned, the Annie E. Casey Foundation, available from 1-800-222-1199.

2. **Quality Teaching:** Experts from the Council of the Great City Schools, Howard University, National Association for Bilingual Education, and the Institute for Educational Leadership, as well as the municipal teams, agree that quality teachers are critical elements of the achievement equation.

- Often, experienced teachers choose to teach in areas where students are less challenged, housing is more affordable, and teaching conditions are more favorable. Cities can encourage teachers to stay in disadvantaged districts by offering mortgage specials to teachers who work in disadvantaged schools; by demonstrating that cities value their teachers through celebrations, awards, and other recognition; and by leveraging business resources to lure prominent principals and teachers to under-resourced districts.

- Teaching conditions are important recruitment and retention strategies. Municipal officials should encourage the school district to examine the conditions of teaching such as support from the school leadership, the availability of ongoing opportunities for professional development, and the availability of classroom materials. Cities can help in this area by leveraging business and other private support to help teachers get field experience in the business or public sector; by sponsoring reading and math coaches for teachers in their schools; or by facilitating the donation of classroom materials.

- Dr. Vinetta Jones, Dean of the School of Education at Howard University, reminded participants of the importance of having quality teachers who hold every child, regardless of background, to high standards.

- Cities can encourage school districts to ensure that the system for advertising teaching openings and accepting qualified teaching applicants is as high quality and as efficient as possible.

Resources: The Merrow report video on teacher recruitment will soon be aired on PBS. Public Education Network has made available a data collection framework on teacher quality. http://www.publiceducation.org/tq/sites/framework.htm

3. **Achievement Gap:** All six cities are grappling to address the achievement gap. Experts from the Council of the Great City Schools, Howard University, and the Education Trust presented evidence that this is a challenge that can be and is being met.
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- The achievement gap signifies larger issues including low teacher expectations, children who are not ready to learn when they reach kindergarten, academic tracking, and inexperienced or under-prepared teachers.

- Dr. Jones emphasized the role of academic tracking in holding students of color behind and preventing them from excelling at the post-secondary level. The "system of academic tracking establishes and holds in place an achievement gap between non-Asian students of color and white students, advantaged and disadvantaged students. The achievement gap is institutionalized in schools and districts by setting high versus low standards, expectations, and course content offerings for the different tracks."

- As speaker Delia Pompa, Executive Director of the National Association for Bilingual Education reminded the group, solving the achievement gap issue is "about owning your piece of the problem." Cities can take responsibility for any number of the underlying causes of the gap.

- The achievement gap is not simply a Black/White gap; it is present along different lines-- class, language, ethnicity etc. This is important to remember in presenting issues to the community. As one city participant advised, "achievement gap" cannot just be code for "a black problem."

- In many immigrant families, for whom English is a second language, the achievement gap can expand over the generations. Some data suggest that second and third generation immigrants appear to be doing far worse than their first generation counterparts.

- Understanding and talking about the achievement gap requires using good data to assess the program.

10 things municipal leaders CAN do to address the achievement gap, according to Ms. Pompa and Sharon Lewis, Director of Research at the Council of the Great City Schools:

1. Demand full disclosure of data.
2. Be a friendly critic.
3. Address the roots of the achievement gap. Ask questions about the number of books in a library system, the availability of quality childcare, afterschool programming, programs for dropouts, the rates of unemployment and adult literacy, and the employment and education levels of mothers.

4. Find and engage youth who are hard to reach, including dropouts and juvenile delinquents.
5. Recognize educators as important workers in the community. Offer high expectations and high levels of support for teachers.
6. Work with schools to frame a public message in support of education.
7. Promote meaningful accountability. Talk about the benefits of testing and get past the blame.
8. Support school bonds.
9. Look at the opportunity to learn. "Who is taking the gatekeeper courses such as Algebra 1 as opposed to Basic Math in the 9th grade?
10. Encourage community-based organizations to link their tutoring programs to the district's curriculum.

Resources: The Council of the Great City Schools is preparing a report on three districts that are closing the achievement gap. The report is scheduled to be released in April and will be available at www.cgcs.org. The Minority Achievement Network is a network of mid-sized cities working on closing the achievement gap. Information on the network is available from the Institute for Educational Leadership. Dispelling the Myth Revisited by the Education Trust is available at www.edtrust.org

4. **Moving Beyond the Numbers: Using Data:** Craig Gerald, Senior Policy Analyst at the Education Trust, led the participants in discussion about how and why data should be used to meet school improvement goals.

- Testing and data can be positive tools for school improvement. Understand this potential and communicate it to the community.

- Relatively simple data can be very powerful; cities can start with what is available from the school district. Mr. Gerald advises city teams to, "Work towards but don't wait for the perfect data system."

- Municipal leaders can be persistent in asking for data. It can be difficult to obtain, but don't give up.

- City leaders should avoid putting data into the public sphere without examination and discussion; it can be misleading. Continue to break data down to tell the story you're looking for: disaggregate (slice into categories), longitudinate (stretch over time), and cross-tabulate (dice data- slice the percentage of kids passing test, first by race then at the same time look at who is taking algebra vs. general math).

- Data that is simply disaggregated by race and not further analyzed can be misleading and reinforce stereotypes.

- Ask the right questions and keep asking more questions.

- Data can be a neutral tool to bring people together or get the public to start talking in a less emotionally charged manner with less finger pointing.

Telling a Story

- Data should have a storyline and plot.

- For a leader, part of being persuasive, and reaching disengaged community members, is telling a good story. Leaders need to be able to tell a story that can make data meaningful and compelling.

- In order to get a bond or special tax passed, the public must understand and be moved by the story, this often calls for personalizing issues and weaving relevant stories- "How will this bond or tax impact each individual neighborhood or school?"

- When talking about the achievement gap, the story should be framed as to be relevant and compelling to all groups, not just one.

- Municipal leaders should recognize that cities are involved in a dual marketing campaign. In order to entice families to stay in the city, officials must tell the story of a school system that is healthy. On the other hand, when campaigning for bonds and school tax referendums, cities must convince taxpayers that the schools really do need the help. Think about this paradox, particularly how it affects specific messages to different audiences.

The No Child Left Behind Act (Elementary and Secondary Education Act - ESEA)

- The new ESEA provides new opportunities for communities to start conversations on using data and closing the achievement gap. Cities are encouraged to utilize the power of the new law to begin to ask questions about students' learning, the achievement gap, and other school challenges.

- The 2002 reauthorization of ESEA requires that districts report disaggregated student achievement data by school. This requirement for more analysis should be helpful, not threatening.

- ESEA will hold school accountable for all students, including limited English proficient students.

Resources: The Education Trust hand-out (distributed at meeting) lists questions to ask of education data. The Education Trust website also contains interactive database of districts that are closing the achievement gap and some education data statistics. www.edtrust.org. NLC will host a conference call with a U.S. Department of Education official to discuss the new ESEA legislation.

5. **Mobilizing Communities for Change:** Public engagement was discussed in two contexts: engaging the public as a whole in support of education and the Municipal Leadership in Education initiative, and engaging a broad cross-section of people in the teams' work.

- Most teams are grappling with how to sustain organized public engagement in education.

- Amanda Broun, Senior Vice President at the Public Education Network (PEN), discussed PEN's theory of action which includes three public groups: policy makers, organized groups and the public at large, and three strategies for engagement: advocacy, community-wide strategic planning, and grassroots organizing.

- Mobilizing the public is challenging, particularly when the percentage of residents with school-age children is low. However, nationally the percentage of residents with school-age children is only 24%, meaning that most communities are working with this challenge.

- Mayors can make a special effort to reach out to apathetic groups through small forums, etc. They can also emphasize schools as community centers with multiple purposes so that all have an interest in the facility. Grassroots community organizing can be an important way to reach these disconnected individuals.

- Supports for Quality Teaching (SQT), an initiative in Washington, D.C., uses the principles of PEN's theory of action to organize the community around developing a high quality teaching force. SQT brings together critical stakeholder groups to create a comprehensive set of services and opportunities, including an independent community center for quality teaching supports.

- Experts suggest that when building a team, it is important to bring all stakeholders to the table. However, it is also important that involvement is tiered and that a small core group exists that can actually make decisions. This must be balanced with the need to use the larger group in meaningful ways.

- Municipal Leadership in Education teams are continuously adapting their team structures around these concepts.

Resource: Communities at Work: A Guidebook of Strategic Interventions for Community Change, Public Education Network's report on community dialogues and lessons learned from community discussions on race and education, is available at www.publiceducation.org. A report by PEN and Education Week containing national survey data on public opinion on education will be released Spring 2002.

6. **Other Emerging Issues:**

    Governance Structures

    - Most cities are legislatively powerless on the issues of K-12 education. Some cities also face challenges with overbearing county, regional, and state governing bodies or inconvenient term lengths.

    - Discussants concluded that even when the Mayor has complete authority over the school board or when layers of governance are less complex, problems still exist.

    - Changing governance structures is an intense long-term task and does not guarantee any real educational outcomes. It was recommended that cities dealing with major structural impediments balance substantive work on the educational challenges with work on structural issues.

    Youth Participation

    - Involving youth is a good idea, both as a public relations tool and for gaining legitimate assistance and information.

- Map community resources using Youth Mapping (AED Center for Youth Development) in order to determine the community assets and needs.

- Involve youth in governance capacities through advisory boards to the Mayor, superintendent, city planners, and/or school principals.

- Each municipality should provide diverse structured ways for youth to be involved in reform efforts such as conducting surveys or performing community service. These opportunities will also give the youth, particularly adolescents, a chance to be seen by the larger community in a positive light.

- Advised one moderator: "Don't let the community forget how many youth there are, what their needs are, and what their strengths are."

Resource: Academy for Educational Development, Center for Youth Development, Community Youth Mapping Guide is available at www.communityyouthmapping.org.